

Our perspective

Student aid

Outlook is bleak in Congress

Minnesota's public and private colleges and universities sometimes behave like rivals at the State Capitol. But they're in concert with our view of the higher-ed lawmaking that's in progress this year at the nation's Capitol: It's disappointing.

It would be bad enough if all Congress was considering were cuts in programs that help low- and middle-income students pay for college. That prospect arose last week, as lawmakers began scouring the federal budget for money that could be redirected to hurricane relief.

The Republican Study Group, about 110 members strong, suggested eliminating all federally subsidized loans to graduate students — an \$8.6 billion item, over 10 years. In the Senate, Republican Michael Enzi of Wyoming was joined by, of all people, Democrat Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts in volunteering an expected \$37 billion over 10 years in savings from student loan program changes for disaster relief.

The political calculus, apparently, is that it's better to ask today's lower-income college students to pay for disaster relief twice — through higher college costs today and higher federal debt service tomorrow — than it is to ask today's taxpayers to pay for it now. As Minnesota U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum objected last week, "Everyone knows we want to start the healing process for those areas. But you don't do it by shortchanging our children's educational future. That's the economic future of our country."

More troubling is the direction Congress was headed, pre-Katrina. It wasn't toward major new investment in the nation's future workforce. Instead, as David Laird of the state Private College Council described it, "Congress has changed the conversation about the federal role in higher education from expanding student opportunity to controlling institutional decision-making."

For example, the bill that emerged

from a House committee would require institutions whose tuition increases exceed a prescribed index over a three-year period to submit a management plan to the federal government. It dictates the procedures institutions with rising tuition must use to cut costs.

It also would allow more federal financial-aid dollars to flow to for-profit institutions, while cutting several campus-based aid programs at nonprofit schools — in Minnesota, by 11 percent. As John Engelen of the University of Minnesota put it, "If you look at this bill, you'd assume that a barber's academy is the equivalent of Harvard."

The Pell Grant, the nation's largest direct aid program to low-income students, appear headed for modest increases in both the House and Senate. After several years of flat funding (see graph), educators were hoping for much more.

"We need to do more to provide for our students," said Mary Jacquart of the MnSCU system. It has raised tuition nearly 70 percent since 2000, spurred by cuts in state funding. The same pattern prevails around the country. Instead of coming to the rescue of public colleges and universities that have been squeezed by state budget cuts, U.S. House Republicans seem intent on applying more financial pressure, with little apparent concern for quality.

Missing in the setting of U.S. higher-ed policy for the next six years is a clear response to the changed world. A larger share of the workforce needs postsecondary education now than a generation ago. More of that education should prepare Americans for careers in science and engineering. National leadership is needed to get every capable young person to college, and to assure that the higher education available in the United States remains the world's best. More access to high-quality education, not more federal regulation, should be the next Higher Education Act's aim.